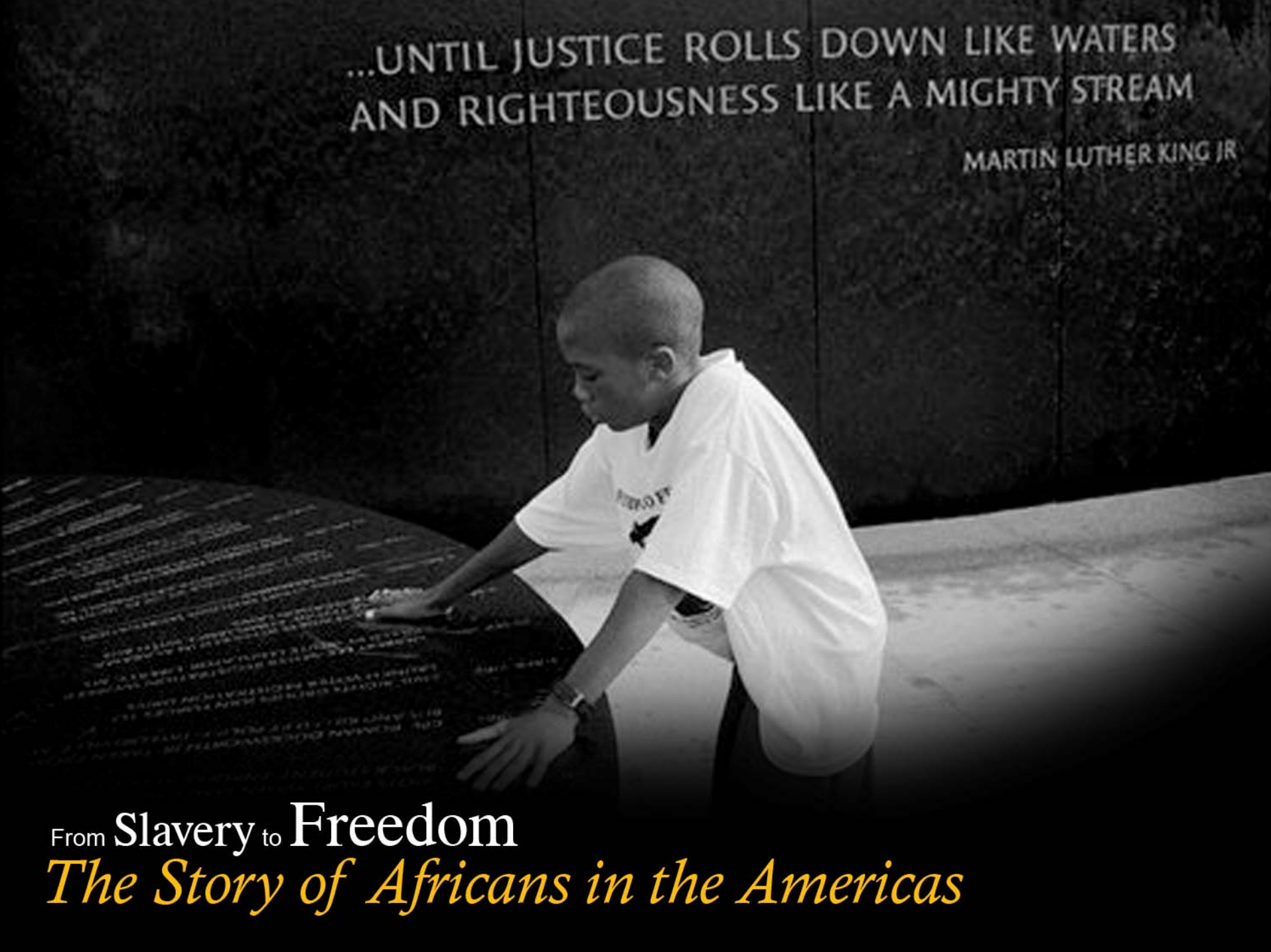


From Slavery to Freedom

The Story of Africans in the Americas

The Slave Era

The extensive use of black African labor during the 16th and 17th centuries on profitable Brazilian and Caribbean sugar plantations provided a model for European colonists in North America, where Indians and white indentured servants were insufficient to meet the demands for agricultural labor.

Most blacks brought to North America were used to produce the export crops – tobacco, rice, indigo, and cotton – that became the major source of the wealth extracted by European nations from their colonies. Spain brought at least 100,000 Africans to Mexico during the 16th century, but England did not extensively engage in the slave trade until 1663. As white workers improved their status during this period, however, both free and bonded blacks were subjected to new laws punishing slave disobedience, prohibiting racial intermarriage, restricting manumission, and otherwise ensuring that the political rights and economic opportunities granted to whites would not be extended to Africans or their descendants.

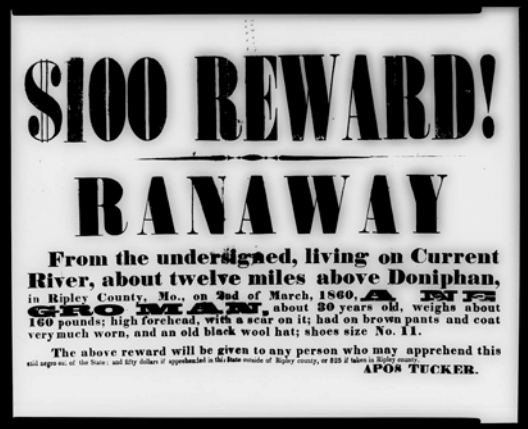
The Slave Era

Resistance

Blacks resisted enslavement from the time of capture in Africa but, outnumbered by whites, North American slaves were less likely than Brazilian or Caribbean ones to engage in massive rebellions.

Africans in North America typically underwent “seasoning” in the West Indies and a “breaking” process on the mainland, which was designed to supplant African cultural roots with the attitudes and habits of obedience required for slave labor. Retention of African skills and social patterns was not as common among North American slaves as among their Latin American counterparts, who were more likely to be born in Africa or have extensive contact with African-born slaves. Only in South Carolina, where slaves became a majority of the population, did planters commonly seek slaves from particular regions of Africa who possessed desired skills, such as the knowledge of rice cultivation. More often, white slaveholders attempted to suppress African culture, believing it was easier to control slaves who spoke English and depended on the skills and knowledge instilled in them by whites. These efforts were not completely successful, however. Slaves Africanized English, Christianity, and other aspects of Western civilization, thereby creating their own unique culture that combined African with European elements.

Revolution & Rebellions



The American Revolution and Black Rebellions

During the 18th century, black rebelliousness received a new stimulus from the growing popularity among whites of democratic and egalitarian ideas. Slaves exploited the divisions in white society during the American Revolution. Thousands responded to a royal offer of freedom for those who fought with the British, and after the war several thousand black Loyalists went to Canada.

About 5000 blacks served in the Continental Army. After the war, revolutionary ideology and Quaker pietism inspired new antislavery activities by both blacks and whites. Blacks petitioned state legislatures for freedom, better treatment, or repatriation to Africa.

The liberalization of white attitudes was reversed in the South as a result of the profits made possible by the invention of the cotton gin. During the 18th century, the spread of cotton cultivation to the Deep South and southwestern states fostered the rise of an archconservative southern political order based on the use of slave labor. The bloody Nat Turner Rebellion (1831) prompted increased repression of slave activities, although small-scale resistance – running away, tool breaking, sporadic violence – continued to interfere with plantation operations.

Semifree Blacks

By the time of the Turner Rebellion, black urban communities sustained a variety of churches, fraternal orders, schools, self-help groups, and political organizations. Although literacy was still uncommon, these institutions fostered self-confidence among black leaders and encouraged them to express their concerns to the general population. The determination of blacks to decide their own destiny was revealed in their newspapers, such as *Freedom's Journal*, and in militant pamphlets, including *Appeal*. During the 1830s black leaders gathered annually in national conventions to discuss strategies for racial advancement.

Abolitionist Movement

Increased discrimination, combined with the growth of black literacy, institutional strength, and economic resources, encouraged a trend toward greater militancy after 1830. Impatience with gradualist plans to end slavery prompted the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison to advocate immediate abolition and, with black help, to found the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. Many black activists later become disenchanted with Garrison's notion that slavery could be ended by moralistic arguments; instead they stressed the need for political action and, ultimately, violent resistance. The growing militancy was displayed in 1839, when black communities raised funds to defend Africans in the Amistad Case. Some blacks broke with Garrison to join the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, while others worked within all-black self-help societies and local groups established to help runaway slaves.

Civil War & Reconstruction

Growing Activism

During the 1840s black abolitionists developed a variety of strategies for abolishing slavery.

The outspoken black orator and writer Frederick Douglass joined with Martin Delany, a pioneer black nationalist, to establish an independent black journal, the *North Star*. Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Maria Stewart were active abolitionists. Tubman and others helped slaves escape through the Underground Railroad.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 increased pessimism among blacks about the possibility of a peaceful end to slavery. Several violent clashes occurred when armed blacks tried to protect escaped slaves or sought to free captured fugitives. Black pessimism was further strengthened in 1857 by the Dred Scott Case ruling that blacks were not considered U.S. citizens.

Civil War & Reconstruction

Civil War, Reconstruction, and Urban Migration

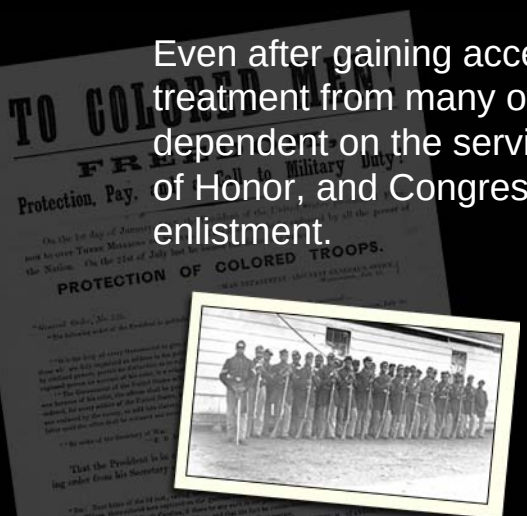
Although most northern whites did not expect the Civil War to result in the elimination of slavery, black abolitionists offered their services to the Union cause with that end in mind. Northern policy regarding black enlistments was inconsistent, however, for President Abraham Lincoln and other leaders hoped to preserve the Union without abolishing slavery or ending discrimination in the North.

Civil War & Reconstruction

Blacks in Union Service

Few blacks were initially permitted in the northern military forces. As casualties mounted during 1862, however, northern military commanders sometimes recruited black soldiers without explicit authority, and Congress finally gave the president authority to use black troops. Lincoln also issued his Emancipation Declaration, freeing slaves held by southerners who remained in rebellion as of January 1, 1863. This act had little immediate effect but did signal the change in Lincoln's racial attitudes that eventually led to a constitutional prohibition of slavery by the 13th Amendment.

Even after gaining acceptance into military service, however, black soldiers suffered racist treatment from many of their white officers. By the end of the war, the Union had become dependent on the services of 186,000 black soldiers and sailors, 21 of whom received the Medal of Honor, and Congress acceded to black demands for equal pay, retroactive to the date of enlistment.



Reconstruction

Despite the Union victory, southern blacks experienced severe restrictions on their freedom after the Civil War.

Congressional Reconstruction failed to eliminate black economic dependency, but the Freedmen's Bureau provided needed rations and medical care for ex-slaves. The bureau's greatest success was in literacy training and in helping to establish black colleges, including Howard University. Yet improved education was of little benefit to black farmers, who lacked both land and nonagricultural job opportunities; many blacks were thus forced back into conditions resembling slavery. Eventually, most former slaves became sharecroppers.

In general, southern blacks attempting to exercise their newly acquired rights faced growing terrorism from such groups as the Ku Klux Klan.

Erosion of Rights

After the final withdrawal of northern troops from the South in 1877, intense racial discrimination and depressed economic conditions prompted many blacks to leave. Moreover, Supreme Court decisions during the 1880s and ’90s drastically undermined their protection under the 14th Amendment. The Court’s Plessy v. Ferguson decision (1896), approving separate public facilities for blacks, marked the culmination of this process. Black economic rights were eroded through crop lien laws through debt peonage, and through vagrancy laws that prevented blacks from refusing low-paying jobs.

By the end of the century, southern white leaders had begun to vitiate the 15th Amendment’s guarantees of black voting rights through devices such as poll taxes and literacy tests. Black political and economic freedom was also suppressed by sheer terror; more than 1000 blacks were put to death by lynching during the 1890s.

Urban Migration

The deteriorating conditions in the South after Reconstruction sparked numerous waves of black migration to the North and West. Although the majority of black migrants went to the eastern seaboard states and to the Midwest, blacks also participated in the general westward movement.

By 1900 the distribution of the black population had changed in significant ways from what it had been before the Civil War. Although still overwhelmingly concentrated in the South, almost one-fourth of all blacks now lived in urban areas. The largest concentrations were in Washington, D.C.; Baltimore; New Orleans; Philadelphia; New York City; and Memphis – each of which had more than 40,000 black residents.

Black Society in the Early 20th Century

The movement of blacks from rural to urban areas led to profound changes in African-American society. The cities were particularly attractive to blacks who had been educated at Howard, Fisk, Atlanta, Hampton, and other black colleges established during the 19th century. Some intellectuals departed from the accommodationism of Washington to pursue equal rights through various protest groups, such as the all-black Niagra Movement and the interracial National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

War and Depression

World War I marked a turning point in African-American history by hastening the long-term process of black urbanization and institutional development. When black migrants came to urban areas to take industrial jobs vacated by white soldiers, the resulting expansion of the black urban population opened still further the business and professional opportunities for blacks. Even before the war, the emerging black middle class had begun to identify its own interests with those of less affluent blacks, who were their clientele.

College-educated blacks did not agree on support for the war but were united in the view that blacks should use the war as an opportunity to make racial gains. The majority of the black servicemen were assigned to support units during World War I, but some all-black regiments saw extensive combat duty. Black servicemen came home from the war with a determination to demand the respect of the nation for which they had fought.

The Postwar Years

Even as blacks returned, however, white opposition to black gains became more intense. After the war, many black soldiers in uniform were attacked and some killed by whites seeking to reinforce traditional patterns of racial dominance. During the “Red Summer” of 1919, antiblack riots occurred in Longview, TX; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; Knoxville, TN; and Omaha, NE. These events further stimulated blacks to defend their rights and support outspoken leaders.

The Harlem Renaissance

A cultural movement – the Harlem Renaissance – was gaining support from black intellectuals. The innovative novel *Cane* (1923) by Jean Toomer voiced the common theme of the Harlem Renaissance in its identification with the lifestyles of the black poor. He and other black writers combined European literary technique with African-American themes.

As in literature, black activities in theater reflected a desire to display their cultural distinctiveness to the public.

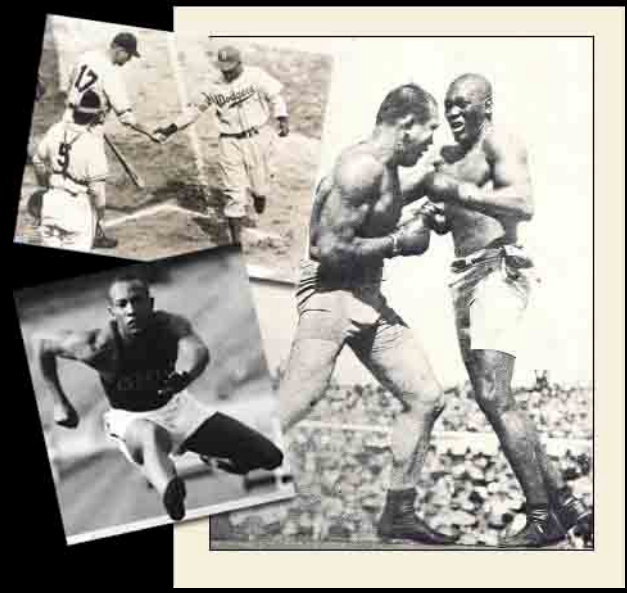
African-American music was also deeply affected by the social currents of the 1920s. Previously confined to the South, jazz and blues began to be played in northern cities during World War I and soon became established in the rapidly growing northern black communities.

World War II

The war against the Axis powers provided a great stimulus for changes in national racial policies, for it increased the need for black labor and heightened the sensitivity of whites to the dangers of racist ideas.

While making gains in civilian life, blacks also sought to improve their status by military service. As in previous wars, blacks seeking to enter the armed forces faced considerable discrimination, although the War Department eventually approved the training of an unprecedented number of black officers and accepted blacks to serve as pilots and in medical and engineering units. Approximately half a million blacks served overseas in segregated units in the Pacific and Europe. As in civilian life, racial conflicts occurred on or near military posts and in occupied zones abroad; serious riots erupted at several camps, where black soldiers protested against poor conditions and racial discrimination.

Struggle for Freedom



Increased Understanding Among Whites

The growing acceptance among whites of racial equality was strengthened by the writings of numerous scholars. The nonviolent sit-ins signaled a new willingness on the part of both white and black reformers to challenge racial segregation. White racial attitudes were affected by the entry of Jackie Robinson and other black athletes into baseball; even before, such men as the boxers Jack Johnson and Joe Louis and the track-and-field athlete Jesse Owens had notable impact on sports.

The Brown Decision

Although neither President Eisenhower nor Congress was willing to take action on behalf of black civil rights during the first half of the 1950s, new presidential appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court prepared the way for a reversal of the separate-but-equal doctrine. In 1954 a unanimous Court ruled, in Brown v. Board of Education, that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” and the next year ordered public schools to desegregate “with all deliberate speed.” Although southern white officials sought to obstruct implementation of the Brown decision, many southern blacks saw the ruling as a sign that the federal government might intervene on their behalf in other racial matters. Unwilling to wait for firm federal action, however, some began their own desegregation efforts. Nevertheless, ten years after the Brown decision, less than 2 percent of southern black children attended integrated schools.

Desegregation Struggle

The Brown decision also encouraged southern blacks to launch a sustained movement to integrate all public facilities. It began in Montgomery, AL, in December 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus to a white man and was arrested. Led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., black residents reacted to the arrest by organizing a bus boycott that lasted more than a year, before a federal court declared Alabama's bus segregation laws unconstitutional. King's commitment to nonviolence garnered favorable press for his protests.

Political Gains

Despite setbacks, the black activism of the 1960s produced some lasting political gains. As black residents of central-city areas became sizable minorities – and, sometimes, majorities – of the electorate, black candidates were able to win elections. During the 1970s black mayors were elected in Cleveland, OH; Gary, IN; Newark, NJ; Washington, D.C.; Atlanta, GA; New Orleans, LA; Los Angeles, CA; and other U.S. cities. The 1980s brought the election of black mayors in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York City, and other cities throughout the country. Overall, the number of black elected officials in the U.S. rose from about 300 in 1965 to some 7480 (including 26 members of Congress) in late 1990.

These gains were counterbalanced by less favorable trends. An upsurge of black voter registration, stimulated in part by the 1984 and 1988 Democratic presidential primary campaigns of Jesse Jackson, came to a halt in 1988. Since that time, black voter registration and turnout have declined.

Income and Employment

The economic status of African-Americans was also a mixture of highly visible improvements and persistent problems. Throughout the 1970s and early ’80s, blacks made steady gains in academic achievements, greatly increasing the size of the black middle class. In the late ’80s, it became increasingly difficult to sustain earlier gains, and in some instances small reverses occurred. In 1980, 9.2 percent of all blacks were enrolled in college. By 1990, only 8.9 percent were enrolled. While the median black family income rose, black family income remained at less than three-fifths the median family income of whites.

U.S. economic expansion in the mid- and late 1990s brought a corresponding improvement in the economic position of black Americans. Black college enrollments began to rise again, and by the late 1990s median black family income had increased to approximately 62 percent of the median family income of whites. On the other hand, unemployment rates among young black men and women were more than double those of whites. Black students also lagged behind whites in access to computers and the Internet, a significant impediment in competing for jobs.

Cultural Dichotomy

The common historical experiences and cultural values that made possible previous black movements for racial advancement remain a source of creative energy and cultural innovation. Many blacks have become enmeshed in middle-class society, with its pervasive institutions that supplant or absorb the distinctive aspects of African-American culture. Nevertheless, poverty and alienation continue to shield segments of the black populace from complete cultural absorption. Du Bois' plea in Souls of Black Folk (1903) that blacks maintain their cultural heritage was combined with a realization that they have a "double consciousness." He wrote, "One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

Sources

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